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LETTER
TO
SIR W. F. WILLIAMS,
COMMANDER OF THE FORCES, &c. &c.,
ON THE FORMATION OF A
BRITISH NORTH AMERICAN LEGION.



TO HIS EXCELLENCY SIR W. F. WILLIAMS,
COMMANDER OF THE FORCES IN B. N. A.

In addressing your Excellency on this subject, at a period when two of the greatest military powers in the world are engaged in what may well prove the death struggle of one or both; and when the danger that all Europe may, ere long, be dragged within the vortex of war, appears so imminent; that even in Britain herself, the instinctive good sense of her people,—aware that in such circumstances an imposing display of strength constitutes their best, if not their only security for preserving their neutrality intact,—has induced them to have recourse to such precautions for self defence as have not been heard of since the time when the first Napoleon at the head of two hundred thousand veterans, stood prepared for immediate invasion;—I cannot but believe that you will be ready to, at least consider and examine carefully any project which offers a fair chance of increasing the strength and resources of the Empire at this most critical conjuncture. And, although totally in the dark as to your Excellency's own private opinion on this point, I have less hesitation in venturing to submit these suggestions to your notice, because I feel convinced that, yourself a brother colonist, the circumstances of your birth and early education, no less than those of your subsequent career, will tend to free your mind from those prepossessions against the proposals I am about to bring forward, which might naturally exist in that of any one occupying your official position who was less intimately

acquainted with the habits and feelings of the people of these colonies. Here, as I need hardly remind you, the conditions of society, especially with respect to the distinctions between the various grades composing it, differ widely from those which prevail throughout the British isles, nor will it, I imagine, require any lengthened argument to prove to one who has shown himself so well able to understand the peculiarities of national character elsewhere, that if we are ever to establish a truly national force of our own, due regard must be paid to the manners and modes of thought of the people from whom it is to be formed.

If, then, the British government be alive as fully as it ought to the importance of obtaining from their North American colonies a force which may be at once a pledge of moral sympathy and a substantial addition to the ranks of their army, it should direct its most earnest attention to the raising it in such a manner as will render it a thoroughly popular and national one; and, since it may be inferred, *a priori*, that the conditions of social life in a young, thinly peopled, and newly settled colony cannot in the nature of things be exactly similar to those which subsist in an old and crowded state, it is but fair to assert that any corps formed here under terms of service identically the same as those deemed suitable for English regiments, cannot, even if it escape proving a complete failure, be turned to one quarter as good account as one procured on conditions adapted to the wants and wishes of our people. But, setting aside all antecedent probabilities, however strongly in favour of our view of the case, it only requires to compare, for one moment, the composition of the British army and of British society at large, with our own, to prove to demonstration that, as actual matter of fact, those arrangements which are eminently well fitted for the one are very far indeed from being equally suited to the other.

Is it not true that in Great Britain society is divided both by law and custom into several distinct grades, the differences between which are so strongly marked that it

usually requires several generations to obliterate the natural peculiarities which separate the higher from the lower even in those exceptional cases where talent and energy have elevated their possessor above the rank in which he was born? And I would ask is it not equally true that these distinctions are thoroughly recognised in the structure of their army? Can any one deny that the officer and the common soldier do, as a matter of fact, almost invariably belong to totally different classes of society? And further, is it not true that the line of demarcation between them is so real and so deeply felt that in most cases the soldier is genuinely averse to move out of his own sphere even if the opportunity presented itself, and supposing by some strange caprice of fortune he does succeed in obtaining a subaltern's rank, is not his success at present almost sure to prove a source of discomfort to himself and others? I am aware that there have been some honorable exceptions to these statements, but, still are they not in the main fully warranted by facts, and is it not in short a fundamental maxim in the British service, not only in practice but in theory, that the officer must be looked upon as belonging to one order and the soldier to another, as is tolerably well illustrated by that almost inevitable charge in trials by court martial that such and such an officer has been guilty of conduct unbecoming to a gentleman? Or must I refer to your Excellency to inform us what chance a private in the British army has, at the close of a life long service, of attaining say a Captaincy, not to speak of any higher rank, or of finding himself comfortable in such a position if he did attain it?

Now, nothing can be further from my intentions than to carp at the system itself,—the plain truth is, in Great Britain as in every old established state, undisturbed by revolution, there do and must exist substantial genuine differences between the various orders of society which being real and deep-rooted cannot fail to make themselves felt in actual life, and, although in common with every honest man, I deprecate to the utmost the addition of any

legal or artificial barriers to those natural ones which oppose, only too successfully, the elevation of the lower classes in such countries ; still, so long as they continue in force, it is simply absurd to ignore the actual diversities in training, talent and temperament, which separate the extreme grades.

I do not presume, therefore, to offer any criticisms upon the constitution of the British army,—all that I desire to draw attention to is—the manifest differences between such states of society and that now subsisting in Canada—the comparatively trifling distinctions between the various classes here—the superior position of even the humblest orders of our population compared with that of the class from which the majority of the British troops must be drawn,—and more especially to point out the necessity, consequent on these facts, of making very considerable alterations in the British system before we can obtain a corps which would be modeled as much in accordance with our customs as an English regiment is with those of English life.

It casts no slur whatever upon the British soldier when I say, that in a country where every sober and industrious man may reasonably reckon on becoming an independent land owner before he dies, greater inducements may be fairly expected by and held out to the soldier than in one in which hundreds of thousands of hard-working men must pass through life with no more exalted hope than just escaping the work-house at its close. But, be this as it may, and whatever Englishmen may find to urge against this part of my argument, I feel convinced that few of them will be inclined to dispute the converse of the proposition above set forth, namely, that since in Canada we are, as yet, quite without any order of nobility, or even of landed gentry in the English sense of the term, it must be admitted that the class from which our officers would naturally be selected, stands several degrees lower in relative social position than that to which most British officers may be supposed to belong, although

as stated before, the class from which our common soldiers would be drawn, are at once better off and better educated as a whole than the majority of English recruits can possibly be. In raising a national force therefore (by which phrase I mean a force which will thoroughly carry with it the sympathies of the people of Canada,) it is indispensable to bear in mind that officers and men are far more nearly on a level amongst us than they would naturally be in the British service proper, and hence if we desire to obtain a truly Canadian corps we ought, in all conscience, to insist on such provisions being made in forming it as would enable a Canadian soldier, if his conduct and ability entitled him thereto, to enjoy as fair a chance of distinction and promotion, while serving his country in a military capacity, as he would have had of similarly bettering his condition had he remained engaged in any ordinary peaceful occupation. And inasmuch as it is almost impossible that Canadians or colonists generally can obtain fair terms in regiments raised on the usual conditions, I most earnestly advocate the formation of a North American legion to consist of not less than five thousand men on the following terms:

1st. That the period of service shall not exceed seven or ten years.

2nd. That it should never be stationed in North America except in case of war breaking out in that quarter.

3rd. That after it was once formed, a certain fixed proportion, say one third, of all commissions falling vacant should be conferred upon the most deserving of the non-commissioned officers; and that no commissions should be disposed of by purchase in any way.

4th. That with the exception of a few of the superior commissions, all the rest should be distributed among colonists alone.

5th. That at the expiration of his term of service each man should receive a grant of 100 acres of land from

the Colonial Parliaments, and that they should be recruited in the colonies exclusively.

6th. Stand in all other respects on the same footing as the English soldiery.

Such, your Excellency, are, in brief, the stipulations on which I am certain such a body can be obtained, and,—since it needs but little demonstration to prove, not only that they contain in themselves nothing unreasonable, taking into account the feelings and customs of our people,—but also that this is a project which if successful would at once tend to unite the mother country and her colonies more closely than ever and furnish of itself an important material assistance to Great Britain at a time when the drain of troops for India has reached an unprecedented height and when a universal European war may burst forth at any moment,—and all without costing her government one farthing more than the enlistment of an equal number of men would do at home, (although it may fairly be assumed that the inducements held out, particularly the chance of obtaining commissions would induce many of a very superior grade to enlist in the ranks)—it only remains for me, I trust, in order to ensure your cordial co-operation and approval, to bring to your notice certain circumstances which afford excellent warrant for asserting that this is an undertaking which may be carried out as easily as conceived.

Nor are these, fortunately, difficult of selection. For first as to mere numbers, no man of any reflection can suppose that the British North American Provinces, with a population some four millions strong, and without a single other demand on their resources, can have the slightest difficulty, if they choose, in furnishing a force not one tenth part as large as that which many a European state, every way their inferior, in wealth, in spirit, in numerical strength even, habitually keeps up,—while the facts that under far less favourable terms one fifth of the required force has been already raised in the shape of the 100th regiment, and, though last not least, that, when that body was

in process of formation, no less than three hundred disappointed candidates applied in vain for commissions, in spite of the very onerous terms on which they were offered,—at one and the same time establish the complete feasibility of the scheme here detailed and supply a striking comment on the inconceivable infatuation which actuated the British government when, in the very midst of the Crimean contest, they risked embroiling themselves in war with the United States for the sake of obtaining a few miserable recruits, at the very moment when (if the facts were one iota less well known I could not hope to be believed) they had ungraciously refused our offers to furnish them with at least two excellent regiments. Surely if a dozen gentlemen could raise one thousand men in the Canadas alone on mere ordinary conditions of service, it is a fair assumption that three hundred, with such inducements as I propose to offer, and the range of all British North America to boot, would find it an easy task to secure at least five times that number. It needs but to proclaim to these gentlemen that, if amongst them they can collect five thousand men, commissions will be distributed freely as far as they will go to all who can pass a reasonable examination (rank being determined as in the case of the 100th by the number of recruits obtained by each) and, in all probability in less time than the 100th itself was obtained, we may be able to congratulate your Excellency on having achieved the formation of a contingent such as Canada might justly be proud to give and England to receive. And surely if any proposal can be left to stand or fall on its own merits one which combines the quadruple advantage of furnishing all British North America with a rallying point and common centre of interest,—which will afford to Great Britain in time of need a supply of excellent soldiers far from despicable in point of numbers and yet more valuable from the moral support which they will bring with them and perhaps from the precedent they will furnish,—which will at once give a vent for the useful employment of our more adventurous spirits and aid in rais-

ing our credit and reputation abroad,—while it proposes to effect all this at no greater cost either to mother country or to colony than the distribution of a few thousand acres of waste territory, which too, may be easily managed in such a manner as to contribute to the strength and improvement of the Province which bestows them,—ought to obtain at any rate a fair and impartial hearing.

So far as Great Britain is concerned unless the terrible disasters of the preceding century which cost her the empire of half a continent and all but reduced her to the rank of a second rate power; besides raising up for her a formidable rival in a state which ought to be her nearest and dearest ally,—unless these lessons have been entirely thrown away, any scheme which can tend to bind her colonies to herself ought to be eagerly sought after and welcomed. While, on our side, the advantages we would derive from such a project, though not so immediately obvious, are still great enough to justify strenuous exertions to secure them, for not only would such a contingent do more than aught else we could devise to arouse the minds of Englishmen from the torpid apathy with which the vast majority of them habitually regard their transatlantic possessions, but it would also tend powerfully to re-establish the credit of the country at home which some late proceedings of ours have damaged more than most of us would care to own; and, last, and in the mind of every true Canadian most important service of all, it would contribute most effectually to excite amongst us that healthy and generous national feeling, which is the best if not the only guarantee for true patriotism, while by the examples of heroism which war, whatever be its evils, never fails to bring to light, it might do much to correct the sordid spirit so apt to prevail among a perfectly peaceful community. And here I shall take leave to mention a circumstance of which your Excellency is doubtless aware, but which is not, I think, generally known, and that is that for several years previous to the American revolution there existed in the British army a regiment now known as the 60th Rifles,

which had been raised in much the same manner as the 100th; and, what is more, that some able American statesmen have expressed their conviction that had the British army, in lieu of this regiment, contained a contingent similar to the one I have just described, the revolution itself might never have taken place, so great in their opinion would have been the effect of such a measure in enlisting the sympathies of the inhabitants of the union on the side of the mother country.

I need only add further that it would be highly desirable to stipulate distinctly that such a corps should always be kept on foreign service,—as well for many other reasons as because one strong inducement to the men to join would be the prospect of travelling in distant lands, as they usually possess in abundance that taste for roving which is naturally strong in young countries and perhaps in all descendants of emigrants. And now, when I recall to memory how, when the tidings of the marvellous defence of Kars reached our ears, the thought passed through the mind of many a Canadian besides myself that if Nova Scotia could furnish such a leader, we on our part ought to find him followers, may I venture to express the hope that if we do for once succeed in breaking through the trammels of routine and if a Canadian contingent takes its place in the British line of battle, your Excellency and no other may be the chief under whose guidance they will march. And what they are likely to perform if fairly led, may perhaps be judged from what our fathers achieved in 1812-1814, when, with the aid of some two companies and a half of English regulars, the Militia of Upper Canada repulsed from an open frontier full 500 miles in length an hostile army which could bring into the field a greater number of bayonets than the whole adult male population of the Province all told. While that their opponents were no contemptible foes none will deny who remember that, later in this very war, twelve thousand of Wellington's peninsular veterans were forced to retreat from the breastworks of these same men when fighting on their own soil.

In conclusion, since your Excellency is a colonist as well as a soldier, and have besides combined senatorial with military duties, I beg to call your attention to one other circumstance of no slight political significance, which is that the proportion between the native born and naturalized Canadians, hitherto nearly equal, is now changing rapidly in favour of the former, and hence, as no observant man can doubt, it is all but certain that in a very few years the great preponderance of native born Canadians will have called into existence a very much more active national feeling than now prevails. In one word, Canada is fast becoming nationalized and Canadian, and notwithstanding that hitherto, in nearly every instance recorded in history, the rise of this national instinct, in itself most necessary and desirable, has proved a source of division and disunion between colony and parent state, there can surely be no just reason why it should not be made a tie to bind them yet more closely than before, even if on somewhat different terms. And, although it does not seem very clear how the bare permission to become recruits in an English regiment, or even allowing a few gentlemen to obtain commissions in it at a cost (in bounties to the men they were required to raise) fully equal to the ordinary price of similar commissions in other corps, can possibly be construed into a compliment to Canada,—still the formation of a Canadian or North American legion with such substantial differences of system as would at once stamp its origin and adapt it to the social characteristics of these colonies might justly be regarded as such. While the success of the 100th itself, (though partly owing to the extraordinarily depressed condition of the country just then) affords I think, convincing evidence how easily, with a little energy, a force might be obtained from us not only of far greater strength than could otherwise be hoped for, but far more likely to secure our sympathies thoroughly on the side of England. And surely if the Imperial Government can deem it worth their while, as they did during the Crimean campaigns, to ransack every hole and corner

in Europe for foreign mercenaries, nay even to hazard war with our haughty and jealous republican neighbours for the sake of a few indifferent recruits,—it will augur but little for their sagacity or statesmanship, if while admitting the feasibility of this or some similar measure, they should yet hang back and refuse to take the step, because, forsooth, the conditions required to meet the wants of colonics scarce eighty years old may differ somewhat from those which it is thought wise to enforce in a state which has grown slowly into greatness through the lapse of ten centuries at least.

JUNE, 1859.